DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 592 JC 870 209

AUTHOR Starks, Gretchen
TITLE Retention of Adult Women Students in the Community College: Research Findings from Exceptional Case Studies.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Washington, DC, April 20-24, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Persistence; *Adult Students; Community Colleges; Enrollment Influences; *Females; High Risk Students; *School Holding Power; Student Behavior; Student Characteristics; *Student College Relationship; Two Year Colleges; *Two Year College Students

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine which variables influence "high risk" women students to persist to graduation from a community college and which variables influence "low risk" women students to drop out of college. The study involved in-depth qualitative interviews with 17 returning adult women over 24 years of age. Study findings supported Tinto's model of student retention which stresses the importance of academic and social integration into college for students' college success. However, study findings suggested a reevaluation of the definitions of academic and social integration, arguing that: (1) academic integration should not necessarily be defined as good grades, as many institutional persisters were satisfied to receive a B or C in light of their "role overloads," while system leavers often had excellent grades and high expectations of themselves; (2) academic integration had more relevance for the cases studied in terms of study habits, learning processes, and the relationship between school and home life; (3) persisters had more formal and informal contact with faculty, viewing both types of relationships as part of their academic growth; (4) social integration for persisters did not necessarily mean participating in peer group activities or social events on campus--rather it involved positive contact with other students in the classroom or between classes; and (5) system leavers made fewer friends and avoided participation in peer group classroom activities or study groups between classes. (AYC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED281592

RETENTION OF ADULT WOMEN STUDENTS IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE: FINDINGS FROM EXEPTIONAL CASE STUDIES

Gretchen Starks

Director of Developmental Studies
Community College of the Finger Lakes
Canandaiga, New York 14424

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
G. STARKS

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

JC 870 209

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting
of the American Education Research Association
Washington, D.C., April 20-24, 1987

ABSTRACT

"Retention of Adult Women Students in the Community College: Research Findings from Exceptional Case Studies"

Gretchen Starks
Developmental Studies
Community College of the Finger Lakes
Canandaigua, NY 14424

Declining enrollment at colleges and universities has brought the issue of adult retention to the forefront in the 1980's and the 1990's and the adult student market is seen as a way to mitigate this projected decline. However, little research on retention has focused on the adult student and no research has looked at exceptions to the norm to try and gain insight into the retention/attrition process as interactive, occurring during the college experience.

This qualitative research study was designed to bridge that gap and to look at the question:

> What are the variables that influence "high risk" adult women students to persist to graduation and what are the variables that influence "low risk" adult women students to drop out of college? The subjects were 17 adult returning women over the age of 24 in a rural community college
>
> Results from in-depth qualitative interviews suggest support for Tinto's model of student retention in that academic and social integration into college is important for students' college success. However, the research suggests a re-evaluation of the definitions of academic integration and social integration. This paper details what kinds of academic and social integration are important for adult returning women and how it differs from research on traditional-age students.

ADULT FEMALE STUDENT RETENTION IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES: FINDINGS FROM EXCEPTIONAL CASE STUDIES

Gretchen Starks
Syracuse University

Gretchen Starks
Developmental Studies
Comm. Coll. of the
Finger Lakes
Canandaigua, NY 14424

Theoretical Framework

Much of the research on student retention in higher education has been based on Tinto's (1975) theory, which is interactive and longitudinal. His model involves a complex series of socio-psychological interactions between students and their institutional environment. The students bring to college certain characteristics such as family background, (socio-economic status, parental values), personal attributes (sex, race, academic ability, personal traits) and experiences (pre-college social and academic achievements). They also bring a predisposition to goal commitment and institutional commitment or loyalty to the college. These in turn interact with formal and informal attributes of the college environment, which lead to integration into the academic (grades and intellectual development) and social (peer group and faculty interactions) systems of the college. "Other things being equal, the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater will be his commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion." (Tinto 1975, p. 96)

Tinto's theory has been validated by six separate quantitative studies at four-year institutions as reported by Terenzini and Pascarella (1980) and Pascarella and Chapman (1983). The theory has been validated in four-year urban commuter colleges by Pascarella, Duby, and Iverson (1983). These studies were all quantitative and did not discriminate between adult or traditional-age students. They all studied four-year institutions.

Two studies have attempted to validate Tinto's model for adult students using a qualitative method. Weidman (1985) conducted a qualitative study by interviewing older women students enrolled in a vocational-technical two-year program. Comparisons were based on data obtained from 52 program graduates and 97 dropouts during the winter of 1979. Analysis of the information revealed that students more than faculty were seen as important social contacts for the women students. As an expansion on Tinto's model, evidence provided strong support for the consideration of "extra-institutional factors" such as family support and the ability to cope with problems of children and the welfare system as significant factors. (Weidman 1985) Neumann's recent dissertation (1985) explored adult persisters from the standpoint of transfer students in a community college. He

used focused interviews to obtain data from 15 leavers and 15 persisters. Although not totally adhering to grounded theory, his findings refute those of Pascarella, Duby, and Iverson (1983) and Pascarella and Chapman (1983) who claim that social integration is less important than academic integration. Neumann found social integration to be very important. He attributes this partially to the image of community colleges as low prestige and therefore academic integration is not sufficient or as significant. (Neumann 1985) He claims that external forces (family, neighborhoods, peer groups and work settings) may influence decisions to go to college, but once adults enroll, their importance is minor.

The limitation of the quantitative studies on Tinto's theory is that by nature of the research techniques utilized, they result in models of risk where the statistics are calculated on averages. Characteristics of persisters and leavers are based on common patterns. The outliers or exceptions to the rule are discounted since quantitative results are often measured by scores of frequency and rely on the mean or mode to derive relationships or to describe characteristics. Thus the predictive or high risk models resulting from the quantative methodology describe relationships of events, characteristics, outcomes and backgrounds of students derived from patterns of what is most common--what is most typical--what is most frequent. And when these models are used in general practice there is a danger of mislabelling students, of misplacing students in courses or programs, or of missing relevant information that may cast a student in an entirely different light.

It is the opinion of the author that these outliers, or the cases that do not conform to the high risk or predictive models, may have something to say to research on retention. And since these exceptions cannot be explained by quantitative methods of research, a qualitative approach could reveal imformation pertinent to the processes involved in attrition and retention. And in this situation, where even the qualitative research done on adults relied on typical cases, studies of exceptions to the rule could explore the process even more to give us a comprehensive outlook on students' decisions to leave or stay in college.

The value of this approach of looking at the exceptions to the rule has been noted by Brawer 1983, Fox 1985, and Tinto 1985. The value of studying the adult population in community colleges has also been noted by Tinto (1982) since little research has been done on adults or in the community college setting, where there is a large population of adult students. (Tinto 1982, p. 693)

Objectives

It is the opinion of the author that much can be learned from those students who do not fit the standard predictive models; who succeed in spite of being labeled "high risk," or who leave the educational mileau when they should have persisted. Thus, one of the objectives of this research was to focus on the exceptions to the rule of those students who would have been persisters or leavers as predicted by models in the current research. The author believed that this unique approach would add a richness to the research on retention that is missing from the literature.

The population selected was adult returning women in a rural community college setting. Through in-depth interviews using qualitative research methods, another objective of the study was to determine what variables or characteristics could describe these "exceptional" women and what implications this could have for policies or programs in community colleges.

Data Source

The subjects were 17 adult returning women over the age of 24 who were enrolled in a rural open admissions community college. These women were all commuter students who attended in the Fall of 1982 or the Spring of 1983 and they represented a range of ages (over 24) and were enrolled in various college majors. Eight of the students were system leavers who left through voluntary withdrawal [SL (voluntary)]; nine of the students were institution persisters [IP] who graduated from the community college.

Exceptional cases were identified through college records and faculty and advisor recommendations based on informed judgments. A stratified random sample was then chosen. [Adult women who left the college for legitimate reasons beyond their control such as moving to follow a spouse were excluded from the study.]:

1. System Leavers left college when by pre-enrollment characteristics of good high school grades, good ACT/SAT scores, and good college reading placement test scores, they should have had no difficulty in college and were predicted to have graduated. Most of the leavers demonstrated excellent to good grades before they dropped out which suggests positive **"academic integration." Most were married or single without children and had spouse or boyfriend support according to the faculty and advisors. Reasons for leaving were not necessarily due to financial problems or lack of spouse, family, or boyfriend support that are often seen as barriers to **"social integration" and "academic integration."

FIGURE 5

THE RESEARCH SAMPLE
[Fall 1982-83 Entering Women Freshmen from a Community College]

FALL 1982	SPRING 1984		FALL 1985		SPRING 1986	
	GRADUATED	NOT GRADUATED	GRADUATED	NOT GRADUATED	GRADUATED	NOT GRADUATED
PREDICTED SUCCESS	IP	SP	IP	SP	IP	SP
		SL (Academic)		SL (Academic)		SL (Academic)
		SL (Voluntary)		SL (Voluntary)		SL (Voluntary)
PREDICTED HIGH RISK	IP	SP	IP	SP	IP	SP
		SL (Academic)		SL (Academic)		SL (Academic)
		SL (Voluntary)		SL (Voluntary)		SL (Voluntary)

Institution Persister (IP): Those that graduated from the community college
System Persister (SP): Those that transferred to another educational institution
System Leaver (SL): Those that left through academic dismissal (A) or voluntary withdrawal (V)

SHADED AREA: students included in the study (exceptional cases)

2. Institutional Persisters persisted to graduation when by pre-enrollment characteristics of high school grades, ACT/SAT scores, minority status, and college reading placement test scores they should have had difficulty in college and been unable to reach **"academic integration." Faculty and advisors also indicated that many of them had difficult home situations, financial problems, and experienced personal setbacks while attending college that should have precluded **"social integration."

Methods

In-depth interviews were conducted with the women according to the tenets of grounded theory in qualitative research. The interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. They were conducted at the site of choice by the adult; about half were conducted in a quiet room at the community college and the rest were done at the place of work or the home. The author was alone with the adult, although frequently was able to talk on an informal basis to other members of the family, friends, or co-workers before and after the interviews. In some cases the adults were phoned later to clarify words or ideas that were not clear on the tape or to ask for more information that was sketchy in the interview.

A structured or focused interview guide controlled for interviewer bias. The interviews were very open-ended and the adults did a large majority of the talking. The interviews were coded and then analyzed for recurring themes.

Results:

Preliminary results based on the interviews suggest support for Tinto's concept of academic and social integration. Integration into the college systems is important for students' success. However, by looking at exceptional cases in a qualitative research mode, new insights have emerged as to the dimensions of this integration. The research suggests a re-evaluation or a re-structuring of the process involved in academic and social integration for adult returning women in a community college setting.

**Tinto defines "academic integration" as grades and intellectual development and "social integration" as peer group and faculty interactions. (Tinto 1975)

Academic Integration: Academic integration should not necessarily be defined as good grades in college. The institution persisters actually had lower grades than the system leavers. The IP's indicated that, in order for them to succeed, they had to juggle many roles as mother, primary wage earner, wife, student, and even caretaker of parents. To cope with this myriad of "role overloads," they lowered their expectations for grades in college and set limits on their capabilities. They were thus satisfied with a "C" or a "B" in certain classes that they felt would be difficult for them given their academic backgrounds. This attitude also permeated their home life where they learned to ignore a messy house or dirty dishes and spent more time helping the kids with schoolwork, paying attention to the spouse or boyfriend, or doing their own academic work.

System Leavers, on the other hand, often had excellent grades and two of the women dropped out when they had only a few more credits to complete. They often had high expectations for themselves and tried to be "super mom" or the "perfect little housewife." They were apprehensive about getting low grades and felt that they had to do well academically to be successful. By using a definition of "good grades" to describe academic integration, these women would have been predicted to graduate.

According to the exceptional cases studied, "academic integration" had more relevance when it referred to other aspects of intellectual development. Institutional persisters often talked about their study habits and their learning processes and how this related to their school life and their home life. They were aware of how they coped within the college systems. They used writing as a medium for developing self awareness and problem solving. They often mentioned utilizing student services such as peer tutoring, career counseling, learning assistance, or study skills courses. System leavers were much less articulate in describing how they learned and often studied alone. They seldom used student services, even though they knew about them.

The women interviewed did not necessarily distinguish between informal and formal contact with faculty and considered both types of relationships part of their academic growth. Therefore it seems that faculty interaction may belong more on the academic side rather than being considered a "social integration" characteristic. Situations related about instructors often revolved around assignments, learning and teaching styles as well as discussions of personal problems. In their contacts with faculty, institutional persisters had more formal and informal contact with faculty. System leavers often tried to "go it alone."

Social Integration: Social integration also took on an different meaning for adult women. For them it did not necessarily mean participating in peer group activities and involvement in social events at the college. In fact, all the subjects interviewed exhibited the "parking lot syndrome;" that is they came to classes and left as soon as their classes were finished. They seldom took part in any of the organized student activities, saying that they had to get home to perform other duties. Thus, social life for these adults occurred in the classroom or informally between classes. Institution persisters had positive contact with other students, both young and old. They socialized during lunch hour with students in the cafeteria and they studied together between classes. They enjoyed group work in the classroom and made friends in their classes. System leavers made fewer friends and some of their friends were apt to be dropouts as well. They avoided participation in peer group classroom activities and often went to the library to work alone between classes.

Scientific and Educational Importance of Study

Studying exceptional cases in a qualitative study lends an insight that is lacking in the current research. Student retention studies have focused on random samples and surveys with institutional persisters or systems leavers to come up with predictive models based on the norm. This researcher sought to bolster the previous research by studying the problem from another perspective and focusing on the exceptions to the norm. Psychologists have often studied what they call "deviant cases" in order to gain insights into human behavior. Using the same premise, it was felt that looking at exceptions to the rule (in a qualitative manner) would add a richness to the current research. Qualitative research about student retention, by virtue of its methods, gives in-depth descriptions of processes involved in students' decisions to persist or leave an institution. This results in information that is much more accurate and poignant than descriptions gleaned from surveys or institutional data bases. Therefore, from a research standpoint, this study has a unique focus and as such is an important contribution to the literature.

From an educational and practical point of view, this research is important due to the growing concern throughout the nation about the decreased enrollments in colleges. The retention and recruitment of returning women and of adult students may reverse this negative enrollment trend. (Frances 1980; O'Brien 1985) Implications from this research could re-define or expand on the definitions of "academic" and "social" integration for adults so that community colleges could direct their energies towards policies and activities that better facilitate academic and social integration of

adult returning women. The added awareness of the factors impacting on decisions of women to leave or remain in school could serve as a guideline to admissions counselors, faculty, and advisors when dealing with this select population.

References:

Brawer, Florence B. "A Comparison of the Personality Characteristics of Community College Student Dropouts and Persisters." ERIC, 1973, 33 pp. (ED 083 980)

Fox, Richard W. "Applications of a Conceptual Model of College Withdrawal to Disadvantaged Students." ERIC, March 1985, 44 pp. (ED 257 339)

Frances, Carol. College Enrollment Trends: Testing the Conventional Wisdom Against the Facts. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1980.

Neumann, W. "Persistence in the Community College: The Student Perspective." Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University, 1985.

O'Brien, J. "Community Colleges Struggle to Bridge the Enrollment Gap." Democrat and Chronicle, Section B, column 1, 6B, column 4, February 25, 1985.

Pascarella, E. and Chapman, D. "A Multi-Institutional, Path Analytic Validation of Tinto's Model of College Withdrawal." American Educational Research Journal, 1983, 20, 87-102.

Pascarella, E., Duby, P., and Iverson, B. "Validation of a Theoretical Model of College Withdrawal in a Commuter Institution Setting." Sociology of Education, April 1983, 56, 88-100.

Terenzini, P. and Pascarella, E. "Toward the Validation of Tinto's Model of College Student Attrition: A Review of Recent Studies." Research in Higher Education, 1980, 12, 271-282.

Tinto, V. "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Systhesis of Recent Research." Review of Educational Research, 1975, 45, 89-125.

Tinto, V. Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Tinto, V. "Limits of Theory and Practice in Student Attrition." Journal of Higher Education, 1982, 53(6), 687-700.

Tinto, V. "Theories of Student Departure Revisited." in J. Smart, ed., Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Researth, Volume II, New York: Agathon Press, 1986.

Wiedman, J. C. "Retention of Non-Traditional Students in Postsecondary Education." Paper presented at the 1995 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, Illinois, 1985.

ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges JUN 19 1987